

Step Up to Writing Research Base



Research Basis for *Step Up to Writing*

While writing is perceived to be an essential ingredient to academic success and effective participation in a literate society, national testing confirms that young writers are failing in alarming numbers to master this important life skill. On average, American students are not writing at proficient levels, based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for the year 2002 (NCES, 2003). Instead, more than two-thirds of America's students show only partial mastery of skills and knowledge needed for solid academic performance in writing. At the same time, a growing number of studies point to young children's ability to write in a clear and organized manner; produce multiple drafts; revise and share their work; and integrate reading with writing skills. In addition, intervention research confirms that poor writers with and without learning disabilities respond to intensive instruction in writing. Such evidence points to young children's potential to be effective writers.

Processes involved in Learning How to Write

Writing depends on several processes that operate recursively with one another—generating and organizing ideas initially, then translating ideas into words, and finally revising (Hayes and Flower, 1980; Berninger, 1994; Berninger and Swanson, 1994; Berninger, Abbott, Whitaker, Sylvester, and Nolen, 1995). Each of the critical steps in the writing process must be taught directly (Gersten and Baker, 2001) and practiced repeatedly (Swanson, Hoskyn, and Lee, 1999) if students are to write coherently and fluently. A brief overview of current knowledge of each process from a developmental perspective is presented below along with the instructional practices from *Step Up to Writing* that address each process.

Planning. Planning is the generation and structuring of ideas, and identifying goals for writing. Older more skilled writers preplan what they want to write, using heuristic strategies in searching memory for content, identifying goals to direct the planning process (MacArthur, Harris, and Graham, 1994), and filtering content that is relevant to the goals and topic (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1987). Young writers with and without learning disabilities spend little time planning before they write; they plan as they write without thinking ahead of time about content or organization schemes (Burtis, Bereiter, Scardamalia, and Tetroe, 1983; Graham, Harris, MacArthur, and Schwartz, 1991). Young writers search memory for content relevant to the topic and whatever is activated is written down.

Step Up to Writing Instruction: Through explicit instruction in organizational schemes, students are taught in small groups to organize their ideas before they write. Drawing on multisensory techniques, students are taught to use color-coding to visualize writing organization by equating the colors of a traffic signal with different parts of a written piece. Using colors and folding paper, students structure and place main ideas and supporting information to achieve cohesive, organized paragraphs. After students are taught several informal outlining methods, they participate in guided exercises to practice their new organizational skills collaboratively in small groups and share their work for feedback.

Translating. Translating involves putting ideas into language (text generation) and then into written words (transcription) to build cohesive and coherent text (Berninger et al., 1992). Developing writers often have difficulty generating language to express their ideas, including selecting words that convey their intended message in a precise, interesting, and natural way. Other inexperienced writers can express themselves orally, but lack knowledge of how to represent language in writing (Berninger et al., 1992). Experienced writers bridge adjacent sentences to establish psychologically coherent and linguistically cohesive text, whereas younger and inexperienced writers fail to establish local links between sentences and instead focus on more remote connections (McCutchen, 1986, 1987; McCutchen and Perfetti, 1982). Teaching sentence-level skills to young writers does not lead to quality discourse structures (Hillocks, 1984), therefore students need to be taught skills to create organized discourse structures as well as grammatical skills to produce well-crafted sentences.

Step Up to Writing Instruction: To assist students in translating their ideas into language and then written sentences, students listen as the teacher explains and models the composition of topic sentences, paragraphs, and transitions. Students then practice collaboratively with classmates, and use practice guides to compose their own works. Discourse structures are taught in repeated practice identifying discourse parts using color-coding and oral exercises. *Step Up* explicitly teaches the conventions and elements of various writing genres, and how to use text structures to direct student writing. In addition to discourse skills, students are taught sentence structures, and how to vary them, and strategies that clarify and enrich language expression, including the use of examples and word lists of lively verbs and adjectives and precise nouns. Students are taught several methods for composing topic and concluding sentences.

Revising. Revising refers to the process of rewriting text to improve it. Although revising is critically important to the writing process (Graves, 1983), young writers are unlikely to revise without strong adult encouragement and support. Developing writers often fail to recognize a need for revision, but if someone points out to them specific areas of text that would benefit from repair, they often can repair the text successfully (Beal, 1993, 1996). Thus, children's low rate of revision is often due, not to an inability to repair the text, but a failure to detect that the text needs to be revised. Fortunately, the results from several intervention studies show that comprehension monitoring can be taught effectively and efficiently to children in the classroom, which results in improvements in revising activity.

Step Up to Writing Instruction: To encourage revision throughout the writing process, students are taught comprehension monitoring skills to detect textual problems (Beals, 1996). Students are engaged in revising activities that call for improving word choice, sentence structure, and sentence variety. *Step Up to Writing* provides models of the kind of writing teachers want students to produce, along with examples of what not write: vague, poorly organized writing. Students are given checklists and rubrics to evaluate their own essays and papers written by

others, encouraged to write multiple drafts, given opportunities to revise, and are not expected to produce a perfect draft the first time.

In addition to these cognitive processes, affective, motivational and social context processes influence the writing acquisition process. Research confirms that affect towards writing impacts students' response to writing intervention; repeated practice in writing prevents work-avoidance; and scaffolding of instruction increases children's learning (Berninger et al., 1995). Through direct instructions, step-by-step guidelines, and detailed examples, coupled with guided, interactive, and independent writing practice, *Step Up to Writing* makes writing easier, faster, and more rewarding.

Principles of Instruction

In addition to teaching each step in the writing process, the principles of instruction in *Step Up to Writing* are well proven. *Step Up to Writing* addresses the instructional variables—explicit and systematic instruction, collaborative learning, and scaffolded teaching of the writing process—associated with improved outcomes as identified in syntheses of research (Gersten and Baker, 2001; Swanson, Hoskyn, and Lee, 1999; Vaughn, Gersten, and Chard, 2000; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Skills in *Step Up to Writing* are sequenced beginning with the teacher talking and using examples, and eliciting frequent verbal responses from the students. Modeling, guided practice, and extended interactive practice with frequent feedback on strengths and weaknesses of student work are provided for each new skill ensuring that students experience success and persist in writing activities. Other research-supported strategies used are graphic representations or organizers of text, which are used extensively throughout the program. *Step Up to Writing* applies the research-supported practice—explicitly teaching the conventions of writing genres (Gersten and Baker, 2001; National Reading Panel, 2000)—through the use of text structure guides for summary, persuasive, expository, and narrative writing.

In a research summary, Swanson (1999) confirmed the importance of carefully controlling the difficulty of higher-order tasks. *Step Up to Writing* applies this research-validated strategy by breaking down each higher order writing process into small sequential steps. Specifically, teachers furnish parts of an essay/paragraph—topic sentences and conclusions—to allow students to focus on other parts of the writing process—developing supports, using logic, and creating informal outlines—before delving into autonomous writing.

Using the content material required for other classes, students are taught strategies to connect reading and writing. Students are able to learn active reading and higher-order reasoning skills when teachers talk through and model active reading, comprehension monitoring, free responses to literature, analysis, and note-taking strategies. Research shows that students' comprehension improves through direct explanation and modeling of strategies, relating what they read with background knowledge (Pressley and Wharton-McDonald, 1997; Williams, 1998). In *Step Up to Writing*, students are taught to generate and answer questions while they read, that elicit both factual and inferential

interpretations of text. Teachers explicitly teach strategies for generating text summaries and a paragraph response and thesis statement that logically supports the answer to questions posed.

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